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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ-URIBE MEETING STILL PENDING

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

1. (C) Summary: The dispute between Venezuela and Colombia over the capture of senior FARC official Rodrigo Granda remains on hold after Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's postponement of the February 3 scheduled meetings. Venezuelan press, distracted by a holiday weekend and destructive local weather, has all but dropped the Granda issue but will likely devote attention to it again as the February 15 date for a new meeting approaches. In a series of communiques, Caracas tempered its anti-Colombian rhetoric and Bogota appeared to accede to one of President Hugo Chavez's demands--a pledge that such events would not reoccur. While Uribe has declared the matter resolved, Chavez has contradicted himself over whether a meeting with Uribe was still necessary to settle final issues. Chavez appears to be trying to put the issue behind him, but his administration's aggressive, impertinent diplomacy coupled with GOV elements' support for illegal armed groups will ensure that clashes between the two countries continue to arise. End summary.

2. (U) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez had planned to host Colombian President Alvaro Uribe in Caracas February 3 to resolve the crisis surrounding the capture of FARC leader Rodrigo Granda in Caracas. Information Minister Andres Izarra announced publicly that Uribe was not coming because he was sick. The meeting was postponed until the following day, and is now scheduled for February 15, according to Izarra.

Communiques and Spin

3. (U) Prior to February 3, Venezuela and Colombia issued communiques referring to each other as "brother" and "sister" countries. Venezuela's statement on January 26 shifted the blame for the dispute entirely onto the United States; indeed, it did not refer to Colombia except to assert that the country was mature enough to solve its own problems. In a rhetorical shift from Colombian Foreign Minister Carolina Barco's statement January 27 that there would be "no apologies," Colombia on January 28 expressed an intention to investigate the facts of the matter and pledged that any events Venezuela found objectionable would not happen again. The communique concluded by noting the Venezuelan government had approved of the statement and thus declared the crisis "settled." The Venezuelan Foreign Ministry followed with a communique on January 29 hailing the Colombian statement as a "positive gesture," rejecting the presence of armed groups in Venezuela, and expressing its willingness to overcome the crisis in a meeting between presidents.

4. (U) At the time the statements were issued, Uribe in public began describing the crisis as having been resolved. Chavez called the Colombian communique a "rectification." He demanded from Colombia what the statement had already promised; that is, he "insisted" that Bogota investigate and ensure that such actions would not be repeated, according to the pro-Chavez press. Nonetheless, he issued contradictory public statements over whether the conflict would be resolved without a meeting of the two chiefs of state.

Ambassadors Back to Work

5. (U) Chavez sent Venezuelan Ambassador to Colombia Carlos Rodolfo Santiago, whom he had recalled because of the Granda capture, back to Bogota January 31. On 3 February, Chavez finally allowed Colombian Ambassador to Venezuela Enrique Vargas Ramirez to present his credentials after leaving him hanging since October. Chavez had canceled plans to accept Vargas's credentials February 2, commemorating instead the anniversary of his 1992 coup attempt.

Additional Arbiters

16. (U) Before Chavez and Uribe decided to meet, third parties continued to mediate the dispute. The press reported on 28 January that Cuban leader Fidel Castro had been calling Uribe and Chavez to try to resolve the crisis. President of the Dominican Republic Leonel Fernandez also had been discussing the matter with both parties, and Chile, Spain, and Guatemala joined the list of countries offering their services of arbitration, according to press reports. Brazil's President Lula da Silva, who was involved almost from the beginning, urged the two leaders "not to fight over secondary matters." In a more diplomatic tone than that used by the GOV, Andean Community of Nations secretary general Allan Wagner recommended that the United States not involve itself in the dispute.

Comment

17. (C) The Chavez administration is adept at inventing crises to distract the public from its failures. This time, mother nature provided a ready-made solution: the Venezuelan press has all but forgotten the Granda affair after the four-day Carnival weekend and unseasonable rains triggering floods and landslides along the country's coastal mountains. Chavez appears to be maneuvering for a face-saving exit on the Granda case nonetheless. His public remarks, demanding what Colombia has already offered, sound tough to Venezuelans unfamiliar with the details of the dispute. He walked himself into a box by asserting that the crisis was not resolved until the presidential meeting, only to have Uribe postpone the meeting 12 days due to health. Venezuela-Colombia tensions do not end with the resolution of the Granda crisis. (On January 26, Venezuelan Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez said he was considering requesting the extradition of Colombian Defense Minister Jorge Uribe.) Nor have the FARC and ELN vacated Venezuelan territory or curtailed their relationship with the GOV. But the publicity given to their presence by the Granda case, and the dissuasive value of his involuntary departure from Venezuela, may get them to lower their profile for a while.
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